

In the United States Court of Federal Claims

OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

No. 19-1804V

(not to be published)

CONNIE SUZANN MUNDINGER,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: March 24, 2022

Special Processing Unit (SPU);
Attorney's Fees and Costs; Hourly
Rates

Robert David Proffitt, Proffitt & Cox, LLP, Columbia, SC, for Petitioner.

Darryl R. Wishard, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On November 25, 2019, Connie Suzann Mundinger filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, *et seq.*² (the "Vaccine Act"). Petitioner alleged that she suffered a left shoulder injury related to vaccine administration as a result of an influenza vaccine administered on October 6, 2018. (Petition at 1-2). On January 20, 2022, a decision was issued awarding compensation to Petitioner based on the Respondent's proffer. (ECF No. 55).

¹ Because this unpublished Decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action in this case, I am required to post it on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2012) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), Petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all section references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2012).

Petitioner has now filed a motion for a final award of attorney's fees and costs, dated January 27, 2022 (ECF No. 59), requesting \$40,920.55 (representing \$39,892.50 in fees and \$1,028.05 in costs). In addition, and in accordance with General Order No. 9, Petitioner represents that she incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. (*Id.* at 4). Respondent reacted to the motion on February 4, 2022, reporting that he is satisfied that the statutory requirements for an award of attorney's fees and costs are met in this case, but deferring resolution of the amount to be awarded at the Court's discretion. (ECF No. 60). Petitioner did not file a reply thereafter.

I have reviewed the billing records submitted with Petitioner's requests and find a reduction in the amount of fees to be awarded appropriate, for the reason listed below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. Section 15(e). Counsel must submit fee requests that include contemporaneous and specific billing records indicating the service performed, the number of hours expended on the service, and the name of the person performing the service. *See Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316-18 (2008). Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). It is "well within the special master's discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done." *Id.* at 1522. Furthermore, the special master may reduce a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing a petitioner notice and opportunity to respond. *See Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

The petitioner "bears the burden of establishing the hours expended, the rates charged, and the expenses incurred." *Wasson v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1991). The Petitioner "should present adequate proof [of the attorney's fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Wasson*, 24 Cl. Ct. at 484 n.1. Petitioner's counsel "should make a good faith effort to exclude from a fee request hours that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary, just as a lawyer in private practice ethically is obligated to exclude such hours from his fee submission." *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 434.

ATTORNEY FEES

Petitioner requests that I endorse the rate of \$425 per hour for attorney Robert David Proffitt for all work performed in this action (2019-20). (ECF No. 59-1 at 2). Mr. Proffitt has been a practicing attorney since 1996, placing him in the range of attorneys with 20 - 30 years of experience. (Id. at 3). The requested rate is within the Vaccine Program's published range for attorneys at his level of overall experience. However, Mr. Proffitt does not have demonstrated Vaccine Act experience, with this matter being his first case to set his hourly rates.³ See *McCulloch v. Health and Hum. Services*, No. 09–293V, 2015 WL 5634323, at *17 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 1, 2015) (stating the following factors are paramount in deciding a reasonable forum hourly rate: experience in the Vaccine Program, overall legal experience, the quality of work performed, and the reputation in the legal community and community at large).

Accordingly, I find it reasonable to reduce the requested rates for Mr. Proffitt's time on this matter to the following: \$385 per hour for time billed in 2019, and \$400 per hour for time billed in 2020. All other time billed to the matter shall be awarded. This results in a reduction of fees requested in the amount of **\$2,285.50**.⁴

ATTORNEY COSTS

Petitioner requests \$1,028.05 in overall costs. (ECF No. 59-2 at 13). This amount is comprised of obtaining medical records, shipping costs and the Court's filing fee. I have reviewed all of the requested costs and find them to be reasonable and shall award it in full.

CONCLUSION

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. Section 15(e). Accordingly, I hereby GRANT IN PART Petitioner's Motion for attorney's fees and costs. I award a total of **\$38,635.05** (representing \$37,607.00 in fees and \$1,028.05 in costs) as a lump sum in the form of a check jointly payable to Petitioner and Petitioner's

³ These rates are derived from the undersigned's application of the OSM Attorneys' Forum Hourly Rate Schedules and are available on the U.S. Court of Federal Claims website at www.cofc.uscourts.gov/node/2914.

⁴ This amount consists of $(\$425 - \$385 = \$40 \times 36.7 \text{ hrs} = \$1,468.00) + (\$425 - \$400 = \$25 \times 32.7 \text{ hrs} = \$817.50) = \$2,285.50$.

counsel. In the absence of a timely-filed motion for review (see Appendix B to the Rules of the Court), the Clerk shall enter judgment in accordance with this Decision.⁵

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Brian H. Corcoran
Brian H. Corcoran
Chief Special Master

⁵ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.